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ABSTRACT

Ways and means of implementing flexible scheduling in language programs are discussed in this paper. Practical problems arising from related concepts of team teaching, large and small group instruction, independent study, and differentiated staffing are considered. A broad view of flexible scheduling as a phenomenon involving planning, staff flexibility, equipment and materials, inservice education, and administration and supervision is developed. (RL)

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FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Introduction

This paper is addressed to a practical problem. The basic assumption is made that flexible scheduling is a "given" condition and that foreign language educators must try to adjust to it. Philosophically, the proper way to proceed is to decide on goals and then find appropriate techniques for reaching them, one of which might be flexible scheduling. In practice, throughout the nation, schools are moving towards something they call flexible scheduling and often the language department is told that it has a certain number of modules and the staff members are expected to adjust the curriculum to this new time allotment. Here, then, an attempt is made to advise the foreign language educator on how best to implement flexible scheduling.

Treatment of team teaching, large and small group instruction, independent study and differentiated staffing is done in this paper because these are changes which often accompany flexible scheduling even though they are not inseparable from it. There are flexible schedules in which the same old things are done in the same old ways, the main difference being that the time segments are scattered about the schedule in a rather erratic manner. If this is the case and the only change is in the manipulation of segments of time, the whole scheme of flexible scheduling is futile.

The purpose of this publication of the National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages is to define the situation of flexible scheduling as it exists and to offer guidance to language teachers so they may get the most benefit from it.

Definition of Terms

At one time a clear distinction was made between the various terms used to refer to schedules (i.e., "modular," "block-time" and "flexible"). However, in recent years the meaning of the different terms has become somewhat blurred. At present the expression "flexible scheduling" is used to refer to almost any departure from the traditional method of scheduling students in 40-60 minute blocks five times a week at the same period of day. For the purposes of this paper the term "flexible scheduling" will be used to refer to those modifications of the traditional scheduling pattern which attempt to adjust modules of time to fit more logically with a given learning activity than is possible with the standard inflexible schedule. For example, a laboratory course in science might be scheduled for two consecutive periods so that students could complete a given series of experiments without having to set up their equipment on two different days. The same principle would apply to a shop course in industrial arts. In such cases the inefficiency of the one-hour module is quite obvious. A great deal of time is wasted by students who are compelled to set up and take down the same project day after day. Conversely a foreign language laboratory period might better be scheduled for half periods every day of the week rather than

in double periods twice a week. At the other extreme, showing a motion picture drama might require two full periods of time. Ideally the schedule would be "flexible" enough to match the optimum time span to each learning activity. Obviously, the mere re-shuffling of time segments into shorter and longer periods of contact between a teacher and a class will accomplish little or nothing unless basic changes are made in several other areas. This paper is a discussion of the changes which must frequently be made in order for flexible scheduling to be a useful device to improve foreign language instruction.

Planning the Flexible Schedule

A great deal of advanced planning should take place before the school and the foreign language department commit their students to a pattern of flexible scheduling. It is not unreasonable to devote two summers and a full school year to the pre-planning of such a program. Planning should include exact information regarding such things as budget for equipment and materials, availability of paraprofessional aides, and all other factors which pertain to the administration of the local program. Such concrete planning can involve only items which are already available or which have been approved for the budget. Tentatively-approved equipment, materials and facilities should not be considered in any original planning. The size and type of the time modules should be planned by all professional foreign language staff members, and should be checked by the appropriate administrative staff involved in schedule making. The feasibility of the schedule should be determined before the school year starts, and language teachers should be made aware of necessary changes in the schedule previously agreed on well in advance of the opening of school. Where possible, pilot programs are also to be encouraged prior to the full district-wide implementation of flexible scheduling.

Staff Flexibility

In high schools with two or more teachers in a given language the team approach is often feasible. Thus, for example, if there are three beginning classes of French, these can be scheduled together in a large room for certain types of presentations. A person who is especially adept at explaining grammatical generalizations might agree to perform that duty (if this is an activity included in the local curriculum). Another teacher may have excellent material and talent for presenting French culture, and so forth. In theory, the time gained by involving students in large groups under the direction of one teacher can be utilized for scheduling students in small groups for such activities as free composition and conversational sessions. Some schools have even found it possible to schedule one-to-one tutorial sessions weekly. This enables a teacher or a paraprofessional staff member to deal with student problems on an individual basis. However, decisions about grouping should be based upon the pedagogical and psychological soundness of the grouping technique rather than upon administrative expediency.

Equipment and Materials

Implicit in flexible scheduling is the idea that the student will spend a great deal of time in self-instructional situations. This in turn implies a need for equipment and materials which are adaptable for that purpose. The staff members for each language must decide upon those activities which they wish to relegate to self-instruction or to programmed instruction, and they must

acquire suitable materials for this purpose. These materials must be available in sufficient quantity, and the necessary equipment must also be acquired. For example, with some types of programmed instruction, the student must have complete control of the progress of a tape play-back mechanism. Before a school commits itself to this type of self-instruction, staff members must be certain that an adequate number of student tape recorders will be provided by the local school system. Similarly, if the budget allows only for audio-active laboratory installations, this will necessitate a different approach to the acquisition of tapes and audio-visual material. Planning must, therefore, involve a clear understanding of the relationship between equipment design and the kinds of materials which can be used with each type of equipment. Furthermore, during the first few years of implementation, the flexible schedule will require thousands of carefully-planned units which students can use for self-instruction during unscheduled blocks of time.

In-Service Education

In no other area of American life would people launch into a totally new enterprise without complete retraining of all staff members involved. To begin production of a new model automobile without a complete retraining of the men on the production line is unthinkable. Yet, in education, we frequently see major changes planned with no more than token-re-education of the staff members involved. In the case of flexible scheduling it is apparent that in-service education is an absolute necessity. In many cases the teacher must be re-oriented to an entirely new philosophy of education. For example, the local planning may include various "innovations" such as individualized instruction, non-grading, differentiated staffing, large-group instruction, student contracts, or a combination of several of these. Thus, the institution of flexible scheduling calls for much more than a series of general orientation meetings. In addition, the subject area people must have detailed and specific instructions regarding the conversion of their existing objectives and teaching techniques to the new administrative format. A school year plus two summers might well be devoted to this process before the program is converted to the new scheduling pattern. This might best be accomplished with help from those who are familiar with the total expectations of the program.

Administration and Supervision

In many of the flexible scheduled schools the teacher is called upon to cope with a situation in which students are at many different levels of progress toward the curricular objectives. All of this implies the need for a totally new system of evaluation and record keeping. The simple grade book may have to be replaced by a rather complex system of cumulative folders which contain the records of each student as he progresses through the curriculum. The complexity of such a system seems to demand that one person be in charge of the entire "team" for each of the languages. This is particularly true if the schedule involves the use of intern teachers, native-speaking aides, language laboratory aides, and secretarial help. Although it is not an essential characteristic of flexible scheduling, some proponents insist that a hierarchy must be established within each discipline. Thus, for example, there might be a line of authority from master Spanish teacher through the regular professional Spanish teachers to the interns, native-speaking aides, other paraprofessional and clerical personnel. The same structure would exist

for each language with a coordinator of foreign languages having "umbrella" authority over the entire enterprise. The coordinator is the liaison person between the entire foreign language section and the school administration. He also coordinates utilization of language laboratories, equipment and materials centers, audio-visual production centers, seminar rooms, etc. In a school system of any considerable size the employment of an overall foreign language coordinator is strongly recommended.

Conclusion

A great deal of planning must go into the implementation of a flexible schedule. In order to get the most from this technique the teachers, supervisors and administrators must keep their minds open to new ways of doing things. There also must be a willingness to commit time and money to in-service education for all of the teachers to help them to thoroughly understand and fruitfully exploit flexible scheduling and related curricular and organizational changes to increase the effectiveness of foreign language instruction.

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